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ABSTRACT

Some tentative connections can be made between 20th-century cultural and rhetorical reception of Isocrates' writing and selected issues in historical literacy. Specifically, two literacy scholars, David Bleich and Brian Street, the former a humanist and the latter an anthropologist, can be read concerning some issues in literacy as applied to Isocrates. In the 1988 "Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations," Bleich constructs literacy as the "use of language" and discounts the idea that there is a meaning "behind" the words. Instead, he maintains that the presentation of the words themselves is the nucleus of social behavior. In "Literacy in Theory and Practice," Street offers his ideological model of literacy, which maintains that reading and writing are for a given society already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as "neutral" or merely "technical." Active literacy in Bleich's and Street's sense resonates well with Isocrates' version of "philosophia," critical judgment, power, the ability to meet unforeseen situations with intelligence. In "Antidosis," and elsewhere, Isocrates rejects the concept that language is a container that holds meaning, an attitude toward language that is ubiquitous in the United States. Based on Isocrates, a new strategy can be devised for literacy education, one that goes beyond reading and writing to an activity that considers how minds, sensibilities, and emotions are constructed by and within communities. (Contains 19 references.) (TB)

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Isocrates, Sophistry, and Writing

I would like to make some tentative connections between some of the twentieth-century cultural and rhetorical reception of Isocrates' writing to selected issues in historical literacy. Current controversies in Anglo-North American literacy study can be advanced by the study of historical rhetoric, a claim that disturbs many of the social scientists who are studying literacy so well. By literacy here I mean not just the functional ability to write and read (although, of course, these are crucial and should continue to be thoroughly investigated), but an activity of minds conditioned within specific cultures, all of which have oral structures of discourse. Our own structures of discourse are now, of course, propelled by the electronic forms of discourse, as I have discussed elsewhere. As we know from audience response studies in rhetoric and composition in English studies, from reception theory in general and reader response theory in particular, the reader constructs a given text; assuming a universalized reader who does not change from era to era or even moment to moment makes knowledge static. David Heckel has written that "It should be carefully noted that the terms speaking/writing and orality/literacy are not interchanageable; one describes two means of communication and the other two mentalities or sets of intellectual habits and predispositions inferable from

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relationships between cultural phenomena and [dominant] communication technologies." (2).

In this paper, which derives from a longer work on ancient literacy, I will read two literacy scholars, Daivd Bleich and Brian Street, the former a humanist and the latter an anthroplogist, across some issues in literacy as they can be applied to Isocrates.

In the 1988 Double Perspective: Language, Literacy, and Social Relations, Bleich constructs literacy as the "use of language" and discounts the idea that "that there is a meaning 'behind' the words, but that the presentation of the words themselves is the nucleus of social behavior. . .To be literate means to be a social being. One is committed to "read" the inner life of others, and to "write one's own life on the blank space of one's pregiven relatedness to others. In these terms, any literate act is a development of one's implication in the lives of others, and the cultivation of literacy always entails psychosocial, ethical, and political practice." (66-67). Street, in the 1984 Literacy In Theory and Practice, offers what he calls an alternative model of literacy, namely the ideological model, which he distinguishes from the autonomous model that treats writing and reading as neutral activities. The ideologoical model claims that "reading and writing are for a given society . . .already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'.." (1).

Isocrates can be reactivated (reinterpretation is not

sufficient) through Street's ideological model. Isocrates' writing and dominant twentieth-century reception offer important possibilties for current literacy studies, possibilities that have not been explored by the scholars in literacy. Both stances, of course, differ from the stance that historical reconstruction is assumed to be more or less neutral and that disregards the lenses and ears of a given reader who is placed in very different ideological, historical circumstances or the related stance that posits one, universalized reader. My proposal for new action based on some aspects of Isocrates' theories will help me to propose more inclusive, action-based issues for literacy today as it is conditioned by orality, that is, not merely the act of speaking but intersubjective activities of minds within a specific culture. I intend to put aside the usual privileging of thinking over articulation and to recognize their merger.

Active literacy in Bleich's and Street's sense resonates well with Isocrates' version of philosophia, critical judgment, power, the ability to meet unforesen situations with intelligence.

My aim is not merely to make a case for Isocrates as a central component of a particular canon of classical Greek rhetoric. For most readers, he is already there in a second tier, at a level that is persistently inferior to Plato and Aristotle, a replication of the anti-Sophistic agenda put forth by Plato and Aristotle themselves and that was so well explicated in particular by Mario Untersteiner and more recently by John Poulakos, Takis Poulakos, Susan Jarratt, Jacqueline de Romilly, Edward Schiappa,

Richard Leo Enos, and many other scholars. Such a reading would simply perpetuate the idea of a static canon and lead to some of the issues in canonicity experienced so expansively in recent years (see Graff, for example) in literary studies in the United States and other places; it would merely expand what is already there.

Instead, the aim is to suggest ways to integrate the modern, North American, theoretical material into what we have received as classical rhetoric, so that we reactivate Isocrates' writings with different values in mind; recent Anglo-American research on literacy -- as suggested here in the work of David Bleich, Brian Street, and Deborah Brandt -- is of central importance in making classical Greek rhetoric (particularly pre-Aristotelian classical rhetoric) part of the cultural conversation and agenda for action, on the pedagogical scene as well as in other scenes.

If these literacy scholars address ancient literacy issues at all, they tend to address problems in the standard receptions of Plato and Aristotle and to disregard Isocrates and the Sophists (see, for example, Bleich, 61-62). The anti-Sophistic agenda set by Plato and Aristotle for understandable local, theoretical, and competitive reasons continued until the nineteenth century, by now a well-known story.

A strong-text interpretation of the kind characterized by Brandt leads to an exclusion of the occasion for writing (or the context) in which Isocrates worked. It fits in with familiar stylistc analyses of Isocrates' way with a periodic sentence. It

erases Isocrates' central connection to a highly oral culture that valorized repetition, aggregation, copiousness, redundance, conceptualization that is close to the human lifeworld, situationalism, group participation (notice Isocrates' use of the second person), agonism, homeostasis, the establishment of traditionalism, the discursive features that Ong establishes in his book (after Parry, Lord, Bessinger, and others) as central features of writing that contains substantial residue from primary orality.

The oral features are erased and therefore context is obliterated in strong-text accounts. This stance effectively terminates the inquiry in a way that is strategically similar to terminating inquiry through deconstructive reading by claiming that it kills meaning and removes the reason for interpretation.

While Isocrates was thoroughly embedded in orality, he nevertheless developed his ideas through and with the technology of writing. When Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Lysias are analyzed with tacit (as opposed to conscious) literate biases, they appear to be overwrought, overdone, exaggerated, really, as it were, in bad taste. It is the concept of a thinker/writer who is not genteel enough. John Poulakos describes the phenomena of competition and spectacle and democratization as central parts of the beginning of rhetoric in "The Possibility of Rhetoric's Early Beginnings." The first two are oral issues. The oral features -- the exaggeration, the bombast, the theatricality, the language magic (see de Romilly) -- appear to embarrass Plato and Aristotle. The restraint brought about by three centuries or so of

writing are highly valued.

So Isocrates is a literate Sophist and in more ways than one; but in many ways he is an anti-Sophist: he would not speak publicly, a decision that had the effect -- whether intended or not -- of privileging writing. His attitude toward performance changed Sophism. The energy of the spoken word, its bursting power, was transmuted by Isocrates. The pamphlets replaced the performance. With this change came a turn. With this change we can see changes in the pattern of thought in Isocrates' writing. While the noetic of the oral world remains primary for him, a new noetic begins to take shape, and it is based on a different kind of performance that includes the disembodiedness of writing. For Isocrates, the production of discourse, not just the passive consumption of it as a hearer or a reader, is central to his concept of philosophia, so different from the Platonic concept of philosophy that is habitually taken for granted. Production of discourse is central in rhetoric, and rhetoric is the center of learning, the center of the curriculum, and the center of social action.

In the fragment Against the Sophists (sections 17 and 18), Isocrates writes that five issues are required in order for discourse training to enact his goal that a broadly-based education should produce a person with effective judgment who can take informed action and, crucially, deliberate with himself or herself. These issues are strikingly similar to Bleich's and Street's conceptualizations of literacy. These five requirements include:

1) aptitude (an issue that frequently disguises class issues; it is, in fact, a central issue in the nomos/physis distinction; 2) knowledge of different kinds of discourse; 3) practice; 4) a teacher who provides instruction in the principles of discourse; and 5) a teacher who displays a mastery of discourse. While the first three of these requirements are well known and often cited, the last two tend to be erased (as, for example, in R.C. Jebb's Attic Orators or in the rapid summaries of Isocrates' "philosophia" that have substituted for theoretical treatment in much of the twentieth century). The crucial interaction of student with teacher is left out.

The five aspects of discourse training written in this early piece rely on the development of judgment in addition to knowledge. Isocrates' construction of "philosophy," or what Jebb calls a "theory of culture" and Norlin calls judgment, can now be related to Richard Lanham's concept of bistable decorum. The broadly-based development of judgment (a quality that transcends knowledge) enables the individual to act within cultures. Issues in life that cannot be predicted are met by a mind and sensibility that have been trained in philosophia. Isocrates' education in culture and how the individual can best interact with it provides one challenge to the still hegemonic Platonic agenda of knowledge and a very different kind of philosophy. In addition, the Isocratean theory of culture as critical thinking is central to a late twentieth-century appropriation of Isocrates in rhetorical theory and in educational systems.

Two Isocratean cultural issues need to be highlighted here: 1) his recognition of the relationship between discourse and thought; and 2) his emphasis on aptitutde, or native ability, a stance that eventually involves the nomos/physis distinction.

In Antidosis and elsewhere, Isocrates rejects the concept that language is a container that holds meaning, an attitude toward language that is ubiquitous in United States culture and in many cultures and an attitude that poses one of the most pressing challenges for all teachers of discourse who work now. In this stance Isocrates resembles Bleich and Street. The positivisitc attitude that language is a thing out there, retrievable, tangible, and determinant, plagues not only our own scholarly and instructional endeavors; it was an issue in ancient Greek discourse education that relied frequently on rule-bound handbooks, rote learning, and the imposition of static models of discourse. The premise (usually unmentioned) that language is a container that holds meaning converts not only discourse into a mechanical object but converts human beings into mechanical objects as well. Isocrates' pedagogical theory works against this premise consistently. However, numerous commentators interpret Isocrates in this way.

In Nicocles sections 8-9 and in a repetition at Antidosis section 256, Isocrates writes:

"the same arguments which we use in persuading others when we speak in public, we employ also when we delilberate in our own thoughts; and, while we call eloquent those who are able to speak

before a crowd, we regard as wise those who most skillfully debate their problems in their own minds. . .none of the things which are done with intelligence take place without the help of [logos]. . .in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts [logos] is our guide, and is most employed by those who have the most wisdom." (Norlin, vol. 2, 329), brackets retranslated). Isocrates refers here to the relationship between thought and discourse that occupies Lev Vygotsky in places such as "The Genetic Roots of Thought and Speech" in the collection Thought and Language. Jerome Bruner states that Vygotsky's work on the relationship between thought and language is also a theory of education (p. v, Introduction, Thought and Language, 1962 ed.). Isocrates sets up his own theory of education in much the same way; in Nicocles and Antidosis he discusses the relationship between self talk, or how we as human beings talk to ourselves silently. Isocrates claims -- and this issue is crucial for modern discourse pedagogy -- that education can produce wise interior discourse. Isocrates did not confine himself to the public, the external, the material out there in the world, as numerous interpretations suggest (and, in fact, this claim about classical rhetoric has been made repeatedly in the United States). Rather, Isocrates preoccupied himself with establishing discourse theory and education that develops inner speech, that enables the student to develop advanced, complex thinking that includes action and that includes affective issues.

Using these bases, one can devise a new strategy for literacy pedagogy: to go beyond reading and writing to an activity of mind

that is capable of recognizing and engaging substantive issues and the ways that minds, sensibilities, and emotions are constructed by and within communities. This version differs markedly from the twentieth-century Aristotle that privileges one version of logic over other forms of human communication and that divides the public from the private and then privileges the public (something we see in the Rhetoric, book, I, chapter 2, for example). This stance promotes a relentless logic that denies what we have learned about the nature of interior discourse in the twentieth century from theorists such as Vygotsky, Carol Gilligan, and of coure many others.

A genuine revivifying of the liberal arts tradition of which Isocrates is routinely and rather boringly designated as the progenitor requires that activity of mind in interaction with discourse communities -- one's own and others -- be recognized and that the consuming of artifacts be dispensed with. Over and over Isocrates offers us a way of treating this issue by studying philosophia.

Many students are now trained specifically in writing. New forms of articulation -- moving beyond the written and the spoken kinds -- can most profitably be studied together and, as Isocrates recommends in Antidosis, with a teacher who is proficient at enacting the kinds of discourse the students need to produce. New intersubjective relationships with Isocrates' writings, his ideology, and his reception will promote a new literacy in a way that accounts for rhetorical history but, more importantly,

accounts for ways that a student can commune with herself or himself.

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